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Socio-political dynamics in the pre-initiation phase of organisational change projects: Approaching projects as a contested and negotiated space

Yvonne Beach^{a*} & Tracey Coule^b

^aSheffield University Management School, Conduit Road, Sheffield, S10 1FN

^bSheffield Business School, Sheffield Hallam University, Stoddart Building, Sheffield, S1 1WB

Abstract

In considering the contextual aspects of organizational change projects, it is notable that consideration of the socio-political dynamics within the pre-initiation phase is largely neglected in current theorization. In practice, a project manager is often allocated to projects post-scoping where the focus is on governance and execution; often with little understanding of the real problem statement and the socio-political dynamics of the project context. This paper provides a critical review of the current state of research relating to organizational change projects and argues that increased attention to understanding the wider socio-political context within the front-end of projects would likely influence the fundamental boundaries of the project management discipline and the role of project management practitioners. In doing so, the paper outlines a research agenda to inform future empirical work on the pre-initiation phase of organizational change projects.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 1142 223334

E-mail address: y.beach@sheffield.ac.uk

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a growth in the use of projects as a method to drive organisational change^{1,2,3}, representing a shift to a management paradigm within the project management domain. With historical roots in the engineering discipline, project management has been dominated by a rational, linear approach^{4,5,6,7,8}, but is increasingly applied in complex organisational settings [3]. We argue that exploring the resulting and unresolved contradiction between non-linearity and controllability within the pre-initiation phase of complex change projects could deliver a significant contribution to interdisciplinary research across project management and organisational change theory, along with stretching the traditional boundaries of project management for the practitioner.

Whilst the pre-initiation phase of projects is considered as a critical success factor^{9,10}, in practice project management often refers to the execution of a project post-scoping and in some instances a new or different project manager may be assigned after the scoping and pre-initiation phase, as reflected in the professional bodies 'Books of Knowledge'^{11,12}. If this is the case, the notion of who is or should be responsible for leading the scoping of projects becomes questionable, as does the likelihood of whether the complexities of socio-political dynamics within the project context are systematically explored and considered during this phase.

As with many fields of management, there is not one agreed definition of project management¹³. For the purpose of this paper, the following definition is selected 'a project is the whole of a group of activities limited in time and space, inserted in, and integration with a political, social and economic environment, towards a goal progressively refined by the dialectic between the thought (the project plan) and the reality'¹⁴. The chosen definition of project management is some distance from the traditional definition of being a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product or service¹². The driver for the preferred definition is that it incorporates socio-political dynamics, which put the project context at the core of the definition, alongside the more traditional emphasis on project execution. This paper unpacks some of the reasons why socio-political elements are crucial to the future of project management research and practice.

This short paper proceeds as follows. First, we engage with the shifting terrain within project management through a critical exploration of the project management domain, its underpinning paradigms and associated role boundaries in order to further understand the implications for the practitioner and academic discipline. Second, we consider the development of a nascent stream of project management literature which takes socio-political dynamics seriously. In conducting the literature review underpinning this paper, the first author began with an initial search for review papers using Scopus, Emerald Insight and Business Source Premier with the keywords "project management", "projects" and "PM". A secondary stage search was carried out using the initial search terms along with "pre-initiation", "front-end", "organisational change", "socio-political" "political", "politics", "environment", "context", "complexity", "uncertainty" and "ambiguity". Papers with citations and/or a publication date within the last 5 years were prioritised for review. We conclude the paper by outlining the key points from the review and developing a series of research questions that will guide future empirical research.

2. Domains, paradigms and role boundaries: A shifting terrain?

Project management is transforming from traditional infrastructure-based sectors to a management paradigm as its use to drive and deliver organisational change increases^{15,16,17}. Recent scholarship suggests that there is a need to shift from a dependence on planning and control to a more organic managerial model^{18,19,20,21}. Stryhre² identifies the opportunity project management can bring to enabling creativity outside the norms of existing organisational structures, which is key to change projects. Whilst organisations may be using discrete projects to encourage innovation and change²² the reach and impact is not discrete, with many aspects of the organisation and its stakeholders being touched.

It is noticeable that projects with substantially different characteristics are emerging, which are inherent in organisational change projects where socio-political dynamics of the project environment are key to success³. This has potential implications for the discipline's future research agenda and development of practitioner training that goes beyond the linear and often deterministic approaches thus far adopted^{23,24}. In addition, project management experience and skills are seen increasingly as a growing expectation of the modern manager²⁵, therefore the significance and reach of such research and practice is wider than purley the project management domain.

The historic foundations of project management as a discipline, rooted in engineering, operations and organization theory, explains both the existence of the dominant rational, linear approach to practice^{8,6,5,7,4} and preference for prescriptive research²⁶. Literature initially focused on scheduling and control within projects characterised by high certainty during the 1960s, followed by a decade of work emphasising teamwork and bringing temporary teams together effectively²⁷. In addition, management scholarship saw a shift from governance and structures to process during this period²⁷. The 1980s then saw an emergence of attention to complex projects and the literature sought to reduce uncertainty with the use of boundaries to exclude or ‘manage out’ complexity. The discipline has now shifted towards looking at dynamism, uncertainty and the changing characteristics of projects^{28,17,29}, but it is acknowledged that there is still a need for this to go beyond attempting to simply measure complexity^{30,24}.

Despite this recent shift, which has seen the acknowledgement of complexity and the importance of socio-political dynamics to project success, practitioner methodologies (such as Prince2 and Six Sigma), tools and training retains the discipline’s historical emphasis on the rational control and management of projects, demonstrating the ongoing assumption that rational control of complexity is possible and desirable^{31,32}. These traditional tools, and underpinning assumptions, are focused on delivering projects in a managed and controlled way rather than exploring a deeper understanding of the complexity of projects³³. In particular, the importance of the pre-initiation phase is understood, but the work in this area has been much slower than the development of tools for the execution stage^{34,35}. A project can be delivered on time, within scope and in budget, as per the golden triangle of project management, which remains the core of practitioner training^{36,37,2,24} but if the project scope was not sufficiently developed then the benefits the project delivers are open to question. Studies on critical success factor studies support the need for better front-end work, with firstly a focus on socio-political factors and stakeholder engagement^{38,39,40} and secondly a need for better defined project requirements and mission that contribute to organisational strategic priorities^{41,42,40,43}. The importance of quality during the front-end phase is noted by many^{44,9,10,45,46} and Wearne’s⁴⁷ empirical work provides evidence that supports the view that poor discipline at the front-end of projects results in much ‘fire-fighting’ in project execution. Nevertheless, there remains a lack of work within the discipline on socio-political dynamics during the front-end work of projects. Incorporating and acknowledging the complexity of the project context appears, to us, a far better footing on which to appreciate the needs of and demands on the Project Manager.

In sum then, the front-end phase of project management is becoming an increasingly popular area of work in domains such as the analysis of needs and benefits⁴⁸, risk management, business cases and stakeholder analysis³⁵, but there are increasing calls for future work in areas such as the alignment of projects to organisational strategic intent, complexity and its interrelatedness with project decisions, the uncertainty implicit in change projects and the social and political dynamics within decision making^{46,35,34}. Hjortso and Meilby⁴⁹ highlight that complexity and risk is often increased in projects due to the influence of individual and groupings of stakeholders whose position was not necessarily understood or uncovered during the front-end phase. Socio-political dynamics during the pre-initiation phase is critical to the success of the project in terms of delivering strategic intent. It is a time when most decisions will have the biggest impact and a time when there is limited knowledge and high complexity³⁵.

3. Socio-political dynamics of the project environment

It is generally accepted that projects are becoming more complex, not least due to the increased bidirectional interaction between social and technical aspects^{50,51}. The nature of dynamics within projects, in particular the emerging use of projects to deliver change within organisations, has not been explored fully within the current project management literature and therefore there is a need to understand better the dynamism of projects and how individuals and/or organisations respond to such characteristics^{52,53,54,30,24}. The implication for the project management practitioner, as Hagen and Park⁵⁵ argue, is the acceptance of ambiguity coupled with more soft skills than what the traditional project management frameworks and methodologies currently encourage⁵⁶.

Thus, whilst the growing trend of project management being used as a mechanism to deliver change is generally accepted^{57,48,1}, there is an inherent tension between the literature on successful change management and the recognised project management paradigm of plan and execute in a controlled manner³³. In other words, the increasing use of project management for the introduction and implementation of organisational change has problematic implications due to the tension between controllability and uncertainty. Human actors within projects bring potentially conflicting interests, differing behaviours and ‘complex responsive processes of relating’^{59,60,61,62,31}. Socio-political complexity

has started to receive some recent attention in project management scholarship^{63,64,65} and has emphasised the study of stakeholder dynamics and their ‘complexity of interaction’⁶⁵.

It has thus been suggested that the socio-political dynamics within change projects are significant influences to project outcomes⁶⁶. Whilst there has been a shift in focus from the tradition of planning in the prescriptive mode to a more behavioural approach, there remains a contested space between the two camps²⁵. The traditional camp focuses firmly on process and control, limiting the role boundaries and responsibilities of the project manager to one of implementation within the golden triangle of cost, time and quality, whilst the emerging view considers the need to resolve uncertainty caused by ‘turbulence’ in the project environment. It is suggested that the shift towards the behavioural camp will increase as a more sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of project environment dynamics is developed⁶². Morris³⁴ recently stimulated thought around the role of the project manager being the single point of integrated accountability from the earliest stage of the project through to completion. As complexity is seen as partly inherent and partly induced within projects⁶⁷, there is arguably a need for project managers to consider projects as a negotiated and contested space, particularly in the pre-initiation phase where multiple and potentially conflicting agendas are in play. This represents a new challenge for the project management practitioner who has traditionally been socialised with linear, rational models emphasising controllability and project execution.

4. Conclusion

In sum, the pre-initiation phase of projects is arguably the time when particular decisions will have the biggest impact, during a time when there is limited knowledge and high socio-political complexity³⁵. This calls for a dynamic view of the interrelations between various stakeholders, the uncertainty implicit in change projects and the wider social and political dynamics of the project context^{46,35,34}. Yet, traditional project management tools and their underlying assumptions are premised on delivering projects in a managed and controlled way, rather than exploring a deeper understanding of the negotiated and contested nature of change project development and initiation. To serve this task, a better understanding of the neglected human dynamics of projects is needed²². In short, while the nascent research stream that takes socio-political dynamics in projects seriously has gone so far as to acknowledge the importance of such dynamics, it has not yet sufficiently unpacked the ‘process-relational’ elements of project management in a way that has challenged the dominant ‘systems-control’ approach to projects and organisations⁶⁸.

The above review raises some important questions regarding socio-political dynamics during the pre-initiation phase of organisational change projects, which remain unanswered by current scholarship within this domain. The following questions will thus guide a future programme of empirical research:

1. To what extent and how are the socio-political dynamics of the project environment considered during the pre-initiation phase of organisational change projects?
2. What tensions exist, if any, in embracing complexity within the project management tradition of controllability during the pre-initiation phase of complex organisational change projects?
3. Who is or should be responsible for leading the scoping of projects?

The reconceptualisation of the front end of project work, in the manner mapped out here, has far reaching implications for the project management discipline and the role of project practitioners. In practice, a project manager is often allocated to projects at a stage where the focus is on the governance and execution of the project with little or no time on requirement setting; often jumping straight to a solution without understanding the real problem statement and the dynamics of the project context within complex change projects – an approach criticised by Geraldi et al.⁶⁹. This paper suggests that developing a better understanding of the socio-political dynamics of the project context would contribute to exploring the tension between the prevalent project management tradition of control and the complexity of change projects. The proposed research agenda will aid future thinking on the fundamental boundaries of the project management discipline and the role of project management practitioners by constituting projects as a contested and negotiated space.

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